



## **The Non-sense of Gender in *Neverwinter Nights***

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### Abstract

Playing computer games is assumed to be an important gateway to computer skills. Although it is commonly assumed that men play more than women, 45% of the gamers in 2004 were women, according to Entertainment Software Association (ESA). Recruiting women as gamers has however been an important strategy to decrease the digital 'gender gap'. We wish to take a look at some of the gender values a computer game can offer its female audience.

The games industry's awareness of girls and women as important market segments is to a large extent economically driven. Apart from the 'women need to change'-strategy, which simply invites women to play traditional computer games as they are, we now see two dominant strategies among game designers to include women as gamers. One strategy is to design games specially targeted at girls and women, a strategy basically built on 'giving girls what they say they want' (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). Relations building, conflict resolving and non-violent activities are often found to be in line with 'typical girls' interests', in contrast to 'typical boys' interests', which are easily translated into violence and competition in computer games (Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen 2004). This type of games has been highly successful, as we see from *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), and online 'getaways' such as *There* (There 2003). However, the pitfall of this approach is to reproduce stereotypical understandings of gender.

The other strategy to attract women is to teach women to like computer games as they are today, only with modifications and adjustments targeting female players, making the games 'transgender'. Research among Norwegian game designers indicates that this is a preferred strategy in the games industry, while games targeting girls in particular are not considered a successful strategy, partly due to the risks involved in building a new (female) market (Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen 2004).

*Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare Corporation 2002) (*NWN*) is one example of the second strategy: Make traditional games transgender, and girls will play. In the story of *NWN*, your player character takes the role of the hero to rescue the city of *Neverwinter* from dark forces. *NWN* is a classic adventure/role-play game, which can be played both as a single- and multi player game, offline, in LANs or online. We will focus on the single-user version. The story of *NWN* is driven forward by a combination of problem solving and 'hack and slash'. The first is considered a gender neutral challenge, the second is perceived as 'already established masculine tastes and practices' (Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen 2004, p. 187). However, the producer Trent Oster claims: "We are very interested in getting the other half of the population playing our game" (WomenGamers.com 2000). Our question in this paper concerns what the 'other half of the population' are offered; how is gender represented in *Neverwinter Nights*?

When you start the game and create your new character in *NWN*, you are told that gender means nothing: "The choice of making your character Male or Female is purely an aesthetic one" (Bioware 2002, character creation). This is an interesting claim, as the game is sold with strongly suggestive graphics, where a curvaceous woman is the most prominent eye-catcher. Our aim is to question how gender means 'nothing' in this game: Which constructions of gender are women as well as men invited to play with in this game? Or, in which ways does gender mean 'nothing'?

Players are free to create their own player character in *NWN*, within the limits of the game. This makes it different from for instance the *Tomb Raider* (1996) games where Lara Croft is the only character option for the players. While the literature on Lara Croft can delve into the representation of that one character, studying gender in *NWN* has to go beyond the presentation of the avatar and look at the realm of the fiction, the narration and the fictional universe. Consequently, we will be looking at how *NWN* is described and marketed online, in fan-kits and in print on the packaging, at the story the game tells, the creation and development of

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the player's character and on the environments of the character in the game such as how the game reacts to different types of characters. The game responds differently depending on race, class or gender, and while race and class have very few out-of-game parallels (there are few orcs, half-elves and other humanoid races outside of the virtual realities), gender can be compared.

We will argue that despite the inclusion of 'feminine' characteristics and the rejection of gender as a sign of a significant difference, the construction of gender in *NWN* is built on strongly stereotypical, dualistic and heteronormative understandings of gender, both in the player characters, the story and in the game environments. However, *NWN* does in some ways fulfil its promises to the female audience. Female characters in the game take on prominent positions, they display non-traditional positions confronted with men, and the game environment establish a 'natural' battlefield for women. But *NWN* is trapped in a difficult position between being a classic game, include women, and not reproduce gender as a stereotypical dualism. We find that this exemplifies an important discussion, which needs to be addressed in critical studies of computer games.

## Games, gender and computers

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The other strategy to attract women is to teach women to like computer games as they are today, only with modifications and adjustments targeting female players, making the games 'transgender'. Research among Norwegian game designers indicates that this is a preferred strategy in the games industry, while games targeting girls in particular are not considered a successful strategy, partly due to the risks involved in building a new (female) market (Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen 2004). This suits the questioning of stereotypical understanding of gendered fantasies by Gerard Jones, as he claims that it is more important that girls can play the hero's part in general than that the hero is defined as male or female (Jones 2002), and his arguments appear in favour of the second strategy.

*Neverwinter Nights* (NWN) (BioWare Corporation 2002) is one example of the second strategy: Make traditional games transgender, and girls will play. In the story of NWN, your player character takes the role of the hero to rescue the city of *Neverwinter* from dark forces. NWN is a classic adventure/role-play game, which can be played both as a single- and multi player game, offline, in LANs or online. We will focus on the single-user version. The story of NWN is driven forward by a combination of problem solving and 'hack and slash'. The first is considered a gender neutral challenge, the second is perceived as 'already established masculine tastes and practices' (Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen 2004, p. 187). However, the producer Trent Oster claims: "We are very interested in getting the other half of the population playing our game" (WomenGamers.com 2000). Our question in this paper concerns what the 'other half of the population' are offered; how is gender represented in *Neverwinter Nights*?

## Gender means nothing

When you start the game and create your new character in NWN, you are told that gender means nothing. This is an interesting claim, as the game is sold with strongly suggestive graphics, where a curvaceous woman is the most prominent eye-catcher<sup>3</sup>. Our aim is to question how gender means 'nothing' in this game: Which constructions of gender are women as well as men invited to play with in this game? Or, in which ways does gender mean 'nothing'?

## Theory and method

### Gender as a social construction

Gender as a social construction is well established in gender research. Since Gale Rubin introduced the concept of 'gender' in 1975, it has been used as a reference to social norms concerning differences between the sexes, as opposed to sex, referring to the biological body and biological differences between men and women (Rubin 1975). Most recent gender research has its main focus on the social construction of gender, rather than bodily differences. The historian Joan Scott claims that gender is 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes' (Scott 1988, p. 42), and 'perceived differences' is a key term here; gender is a social construction which divides the society into the two categories male and

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, in the MAC version the game has no suggestive graphics on the packaging at all. This is perhaps due to the target group, apple marketing tends to portray users of apple machines as more culturally conscious than PC users, and should be less likely to be swayed by an ample bosom and more by elegant design.

female based on how we perceive differences between men and women. On the one hand, “nothing about the body... determines univocally how social divisions will be shaped,” according to Scott (1988, p. 2). On the other hand, gender is also pervasive in a way that makes it potent to explain phenomena, which at first hand do not involve gender. Thus, gender might be understood as interwoven in various cultural discourses about ‘other things’.

These cultural discourses create expectations towards the individual, often based on gender. In Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘discourse theory’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), the concept of ‘subject position’ refers to the discursive guidelines for individuals about appropriate behaviour, dress code, expected social positions and accomplishments. Most discourses have distinct male and female subject positions, which mean that we expect different things from men and women.

Dorte Marie Søndergaard claims that men and women might break some, but not too many, ‘gendered rules’ and still act as recognizable men or women (Søndergaard 1996). Looking at a player character like Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, it is obvious that her pioneer position as female heroine in a violent battle breaks many ‘feminine’ rules. However, her distinct female appearance also makes a solid confirmation of her gender, and she remains a ‘feminine’ woman despite her rather masculine deeds. This also makes her ambiguous as a player character; is the female heroine Lara meant to make women associate themselves with the game, or is the feminine Lara meant to attract men? According to Helen Kennedy (2002), Lara was to be potentially attractive to the female players:

It is clear that the producers of Lara wanted to market her as a character *potentially* appealing to women; her arrival on the game scene dovetailed nicely with the 90’s ‘girlpower’ zeitgeist and could potentially have hit a positive chord with the emergent ‘laddette’ culture which very much centred on playing ‘lads’ at their own game(s).

It is however not so clear whether they actually reached their goal, as playing Lara may be as much about controlling Lara as about identifying with her, and the highly sexualised body inviting the gaze and catering to the pornographic standard of hypersexuality indicates that this is a significant part of her role (Kennedy 2002, Downs and Smith 2005)<sup>4</sup>.

Like Lara Croft, many of the early female heroines have been criticized for being ‘eye candy’ for men (Liestøl 2001, p. 56). Some would claim that this is a result of a game industry dominated by young men applying an ‘I-methodology’ – a strategy where designers use their own preferences as a measure of what they think users want (Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen 2004, p. 181). Although “biology” might not make a difference in the statistics of the different genders of the player characters of *NWN*, bodily differences are used in *NWN* to construct gender in specific ways, as we will demonstrate in this study.

## Cultural studies

When we analyse a popular culture object and treat it as a text, in search of certain representations of a treat shared by a group of people not commonly thought of as the dominant participants in politics, economy and culture, we need to address the cultural studies tradition.

The cultural studies tradition, with Stuart Hall’s article “Encoding/decoding” (Hall 1990), opens for a reading of popular cultural artefacts with a view for the communication of ideology and politics. Stuart Hall uses television as his example of a complex communication process. He describes the infrastructure needed to produce a programme, distribution and the social context of its use. Then he creates a model of encoding and decoding, in order to make explicit the idea that the intention of the sender may not match the understanding of the receiver, and how this lack of symmetry can both cause plain misunderstandings as well as cultural resistance. The model expresses a semiotic understanding of creation of meaning, and the continuous negotiation in a discursive relationship between a cultural artefact and its user.

The Birmingham school of Cultural Studies emphasised the context for communication, and the relationship between society, technology and the development and understanding of culture. No cultural artefact is created independent of the society which creates it. A computer game is heavily dependent on a very recently distributed technological infrastructure, and some of the games released every year are made not for the contemporarily established technology but for the state-of-the-art. This makes games a locomotive for

<sup>4</sup> In the next *Tomb Raider* game, the busty Lara Croft will appear with smaller breasts than she has in the previous games, down from a DD-cup to a C, according to the Times (Hopkins and Sulaiman 2005), which might indicate that the designers to some degree has listened to the feminist criticism of Lara Croft (Kennedy 2002, Schleiner 2001), and perhaps also has a new attentiveness towards female players.

distribution of the technology needed to play them. If we compare the way new and updated computer games relate to the computers with other technological bridging periods, for instance the move from black and white television to colour, we see that the computer game/computer co-dependency is a very tight and continuous relationship, rather than a sudden step from one technology to another. The difference here is that while colour television and black and white existed side by side for decades and colour programs could be viewed in black and white and vice versa, the development of the computer technology is much more rapid, and at two years old the originally state-of-the-art computer is no longer able to deal with the demands of a new game. The computers are also not made backwards compatible; it is not always possible to play an old game on a new computer. And so, while the computer is viewed and widely used as a tool for research, writing and information collection and management, the factor that perhaps contributes the most to maintaining an updated general hardware pool today is the rapidly expanding and very demanding game industry.

Despite these differences, Raymond Williams' writing in the seventies in *Television, technology and cultural form* (1974) is still useful to understand the development of communication technology:

It is never quite true to say that in modern societies, when a social need has been demonstrated, its appropriate technology will be found. This is partly because some real needs, in any particular period, are beyond the scope of existing or foreseeable scientific and technical knowledge. It is even more because the key question, about technological response to a need, is less a question about the need itself than about its place in an existing social formation. A need which corresponds with the priorities of the real decision-making groups will, obviously, more quickly attract the investments of resources and the official permission, approval or encouragement on which a working technology, as distinct from available technical devices, depends. (Williams 1974, p. 19)

Computer games may be said to satisfy a need, the need for entertainment. And as computer games become increasingly intricate, they create a need for better computers, better hardware and software. This is a need which the computer industry is only too happy to respond to, as it means they get a constantly renewable pool of customers.

This makes computer games cultural artefacts which appear to be pushed mainly by the hardware industry and the economy. Such commercial products would be fairly uninteresting to our analysis, as we could predict that they would aim at technological sophistication over artistic quality, conservation of hegemonic structures over alternative structures of society, confirmation of the existing power structures over rebellion. In the game culture there is however another tradition which clashes with this rather grim image of a culture of production driven by a money-hungry industry.

The history of computer games is playful, and shows how games spring out of the leisurely pursuits of exploring the options of a new technology. The first game produced for a computer was *Spacewar*, created by Steve Russel at MIT, in 1962. This game was developed to test the ability of the mainframe, fully in the spirit of present-day hardware challenging games, but also to engage the user and change the relationship between the user of the computer and the computer itself.

"Zooming across the galaxy with our Bergenholm Inertialess Drive, the Hingham Institute Study Group on Space Warfare devised its Theory of Computer Toys. A good demonstration program ought to satisfy three criteria:

- It should *demonstrate* as many of the computer's resources as possible, and tax those resources to the limit;
- Within a consistent framework, it should be interesting, which means every run should be different;
- It should involve the onlooker in a pleasurable and active way -- in short, it should be a game.

With the Fenachrone hot on our ion track, Wayne said, "Look, you need action and you need some kind of skill level. It should be a game where you have to control things moving around on the scope, like, oh, spaceships. Something like an explorer game, or a race or contest... a fight, maybe?"

'SPACEWAR!' shouted Slug and I, as the last force screen flared into the violet and went down" (Goldberg 2005).

While the game *Spacewar* was devised to test the technology, at this point neither the technology nor the software was developed for commercial use. The thought that this could be used commercially came around 1971, as Nolan Bushnell realised that this could be used to build a video game slot machine (Kent 2001, p. 31).



The text-based adventure games related to the graphic adventure game *Neverwinter Nights* did not spring out of the need to test technology, but from the desire to play a game already played in the flesh through the computer as well. The original *Adventure* was created in 1972 by Will Crowther, out of the desire to recreate the thrill of mapping caves. Later it filled another non-commercial position in his life.

Unfortunately, it was during this period that Crowther's marriage ended. Feeling estranged from his two daughters and wanting to be closer to them, he decided to write a program that they might enjoy: a simulation of his cave explorations that also contained elements of his fantasy roleplaying. He was intrigued by the idea of trying a computer-mediated version of the game. (Adams 2005)

We can claim that this positions computer games as an originally subversive type of software, built to challenge either the hardware (*Spacewar*) or the distinction between physical and mental space (*Adventure*). The concepts of simulation, virtual models, abstraction, the fantastic and science fiction and fantasy were present in both the distinctly different types of games. *Neverwinter Nights* exemplifies a synthesis of these different approaches, and also refers to a practice of gaming which, while it is quite old in some forms, is seen as a recent addition to popular culture.

Role play games (RPGs) grew out of the roots of mimic games and the war games in the early 1960s. In 1974 several different types of games had merged and evolved into *Dungeons and Dragons*, which developed into *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, at which point the role-playing games became an industry (Wikipedia 2005). These games are interesting artefacts both because of the way they evolve within a subculture deeply immersed in literature (science fiction and fantasy), predominantly male and still outside of mainstream literature, and because they represent a new paradigm of involvement, one where the audience is no longer only active in decoding the message, but switches sides and becomes a sender, encoding messages. Play needs the challenge of reciprocity and resistance, and the computer opened for two different ways of offering this. One is through letting the machine offer the resistance, playing against the computer script. The other is through multi-player games, where other players offer the resistance, as in the early MUDs. As the MUDs developed these two versions combined, and permitted groups of players to play together against the machine, or use the program strategically in games against each other. This is the situation we have with *Neverwinter Nights*.

*Neverwinter Nights* is a role-playing game that can be played as a single player (woman against machine) or multiplayer game. It allows the multi-play to be against the machine, player versus player, or more engaged role-play, and it also allows for building individual boards. This is an interesting development, as it to a certain degree gives the powers of production into the hands of the users. While this is a radical departure from the classic sender-receiver model of communication theory, the turn-taking as initiator and receiver is not unknown in play, games and sports, online and offline. Developing tracks or planning courses is also a speciality in certain sports, and in free-form play it is a major aspect of the make-believe: "that chair is the boat, and this spoon is a paddle, and now we will paddle down the Amazon River and hope we are not eaten by the cannibal tribes." In a computer game you can make object A appear to be a boat, object B appear to be a paddle, and you can make script C, D and E be cannibals attacking you: a medium more malleable by the playful mind than physical objects are.

## What we, the researchers, did

In order to understand the game we want to analyse, we had to play it. Both researchers spent long hours playing through the game. We had very different playing styles, something which gave us very different game experiences. After the game was played through, we needed to analyse these experiences through comparing notes and going back into the game to check on what we remembered.

Analysing computer games has some methodological challenges which analysing a film or a book does not offer.

- 1) *Neverwinter Nights* is one of the more linear games at the market, as you are forced to proceed from chapter to chapter, without turning back. For all purposes of the structure of the game, each of these chapters could be separate games. Until a chapter is finished, it offers considerable influence on the order of the tasks and quests solved, as well as the option to skip several quests as long as the player finishes the main ones. This means that the playing experience of two players playing the same game, or even the same person playing over again, will differ a lot more than two people reading the same book. It also means that it is easier to not encounter interesting features

which could have cast more light on the topic at hand, or put emphasis on something which others might consider trivial. One example of this came up early, when one of us (let's call her A) had chosen a pre-set character, and she experienced this character as being almost nude. When A called attention to this, B didn't even think of the character as nude, and dismissed the whole problem, simply because B's experience told her the females in *NWN* were totally covered. Both reactions were however valid: while the character was not undressed, you would have to change the colour of the clothing to see this, because the trousers in particular is not really bulk on the body, just different colours filled into the body outline.

- 2) Playing games takes time. When you read a book, if you have read all the pages of a chapter, you know you are done with that chapter. You may need to go back later and check the text on page 237, but you know the text is there, it is easy to find it and while you may gain a new understanding of it later, it is not like going back will reveal a whole new page. Computer games are not set in this manner. Playing a chapter of *NWN* over again, particularly with a different typ character, may give a totally different experience. Playing through the game with different characters made the game change according to the choices the player did both at the beginning and along the way – the equivalent of somebody unlocking pages in a book.
- 3) Games do not open up unless the player makes it happen. With a movie or a book, it is possible to scroll to the last 20 minutes, if you want to check what happens later, or you can open the book 124 pages later if you prefer that, to see if the character you are focusing on will be important or even alive then. A game is locked until you go through the necessary motions to unlock it. And this is both the appeal of games to players and the problem of games to researchers: there might be a wonderful treasure in your future, and this promise keeps you playing – but for the researcher it is annoying not to be able to jump ahead and see if we're just wasting time.

To solve these problems, we used fan material from the net. Hints, cheats and walkthroughs are important tools, and available as books and magazines for the more complex games. You can also find very good tools online, in fan- and gaming sites. Hints are not complete walkthroughs. They give you a pointer towards how to solve the quest, and leave the player to sort it out. Walkthroughs are complete descriptions of what happens in the game and what you need to do to make it happen. Cheats are ways to make the game yield such benefits as more money, more powerful characters or better equipment. The problem of the different experiences was solved through using walkthroughs. This gave us a common point of reference, and then we could share what we did and did not do at the different stages. Walkthroughs also solved the problem of the 'hidden pages' and of the locked game, by making it easier to solve the problem at hand and so speeding up the playing process, and by giving us a glimpse of what was worth focusing on later.

Using fan material also gave us the option of looking at other people's experiences with the game, their preferences, likes, dislikes and interpretations. We have used this to inform our own reading, but we do not analyse this material.

Our reading of the game is otherwise quite similar to any other media study. We were prepared to be provoked into an oppositional reading, pointing out how the game failed to give women role-models, alternatives to traditional gender roles, and realistic bodies, and to a certain extent we do this. But the many good attempts at diversity in this game changed our approach to a more negotiating reading, heavily informed by a semiotic understanding where we attempt to uncover the meaning of the phenomena we meet in the game as it relates to not just the universe of what we would have desired (a universe of perfect equal treatment of all genders), but also the universe the game manages to avoid (a universe where women are nothing but eyecandy and victims). One of our early conclusions was that the game made some very good attempts, and this has coloured the reading throughout.

## Gender constructions in *Neverwinter Nights*

### The gameplay

The game is a common mix of hack'n'slash and riddle solving, where both types of skills are needed to solve the quests. The advancement strategy and the logarithms for balancing opponents in "battle" is similar to *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, but as there is a computer to do the computing necessary, the logarithms are easily adjustable to the level of challenge and complexity desired, by choosing the difficulty level of the game.



*Neverwinter Nights* has a prelude (academy training) and four chapters, and you encounter new quests, challenges and enemies<sup>5</sup> in each chapter. The game is driven forward by killing enemies and solving quests to gain experience points and gold, helping non-playing characters (NPCs), finding, rescuing and returning objects and people. Some quests are obligatory for you to be able to advance to the next chapter, while other quests are voluntary, but still give you experience points. You cannot advance in the game without doing what amounts to 'killing,' but you can choose the violence setting you wish, from low to special. If you do not want the game to be very violent for younger players, it is possible to set a violence password. Talking to non-playing characters (NPCs) is an important part of the game. Towards the end your choices and conversations earlier in the game will influence parts of the outcome.

*Neverwinter Nights* is of the same type of games as *Baldur's Gate* (1998), which Hartmann and Klimmt used as an example of a non-competitive game (Hartmann and Klimmt 2005, p. 14). Their study showed that women definitely preferred non-competitive games, and so it should fit neatly into the categories current research has for categorising games as something women would like. This, of course, makes it even more interesting to see what women are offered: the games women are not supposed to dislike, how do they represent women?

### **The story of *Neverwinter Nights***

In the story of *NWN*, your player character takes the role of the hero to rescue the city of Neverwinter from dark forces, through solving a long stream of different quests. While your character is fulfilling these quests, the background story unfolds. It is a story of betrayal, anger, revenge, greed and love lost, and it started in another age, when the Queen Morag of the elder people decided that in order to save her people she would have to move her world into a different dimension, and emerge when humans, elves, dwarves and orcs have forgotten about her power and are ripe for harvesting for slaves, sources of power and of pain and despair, which she thrives on. Through a veil of magic she manipulates the greedy and weak, and her touch turns the love of Lady Aribeth and Fenthick into bitter pain, as Fenthick is executed for the betrayal performed by his friend, Dester. Lady Aribeth in turn betrays Neverwinter, as she turns to Maugrim in Luskan, and agrees to lead his forces against Neverwinter in revenge for the execution of innocent Fenthick.

The search for four words of power in chapter 3 at one point brings you millennia back in time and face to face with Morag at the peak of her power. But it also reveals that you have an ally, Haedraline, a slave bound to live forever in service of Morag. The third chapter only gives you three words of power, as Maugrim already has one, so returning to Neverwinter you have to confront Maugrim – and, as part of that, you have to confront Aribeth.

This is the only point where your actions earlier in the game can actually change the scope of the story. If you have made certain choices early in the game, you can save Aribeth, if not, she dies. In the face of the many deaths you have already caused, seen and somehow participated in before this point, this may not seem to be such a big deal. Aribeth is however the only character which gets a real personality among the NPCs. Even your six optional helpers with their individual struggles and personal quests appear ridiculously simple compared to Aribeth's tale.

With the four words gathered in hand, it is time to open the gate into Morag's realm, fight her in her lair and finish it once and for all. And yes, you manage to do that after a spectacularly difficult fight, the world is as safe as it can be, for a time it gets a rest from plague and war and can recover, while you have the chance to move on and continue your adventures, online or in other games.

### **Aribeth de Tylmarande**

No matter what the player character (PC) may have to offer statistics wise, it has no background, and the narrative focus is on one of the NPCs of the game: Aribeth de Tylmarande, a Paladin of Tyr, champion of Neverwinter. Through the game she develops from a bland paladin into a bitter, unhappy opponent and traitor, selling her knowledge of Neverwinter to the enemy. She leads the armies of destruction against the little enclave of human civilisation and peace, but not after much painful soul-searching and nightmares. Through all of chapter two, if the player stops to talk to Aribeth the dialogue describes her doubts, her insecurity and her helplessness, as well as her bitter grief. It is this which turns her against her former allies

<sup>5</sup> You meet enemies in various shapes, as either one of the race that you might choose from in creating your character. However, the main foes in the game are goblins, orcs, skeletons, zombies, vampires, trolls, rakshasas, golems, balors and dragons.

in the end. Arin Gend, spymaster of Lord Nasher and your contact once Aribeth has joined the enemy, explains her plight like this: "Aribeth loved Neverwinter, just as she loved Fenthick – and the city she loved turned its hatred and desire for vengeance on the man she loved" (BioWare 2002).

The Aribeth character reaches beyond Neverwinter. Other important characters in the game have fairly well fleshed out backgrounds. There is for instance in the game a whole book on Nasher Algondar, the Lord of Neverwinter, and his companions Ophala Cheldarstorn, Dumal Erard and Kurth. We meet all of these characters in the game, Ophala as matron of the brothel in Neverwinter, Dumal Erard is head of Helm's Hold and you release him from the prison, but Kurth you may have to kill and either sell his head to the other High Captain of Luskan, or sell him a head. Aribeth is however not in any such stories, despite her important position in the game. All we know is what we are told right away, she is a paladin of Tyr, she is the partner of Fenthick, and she is brave and just. We do however in the last chapter get a hint that she may be part of something larger than Neverwinter, as one of the doors in the magic world leading to Morag's Lair is guarded by a woman in chain mail of the exact same design as Aribeth's, and this woman returns to her other world after a short dialogue with you.

Aribeth is a character who has lived on outside the game. Players have created modules in honour of her and her plight, such as 'Aribeth's Dilemma' and 'Aribeth's fate,' both linked from *Aribeth's Fansite* (Thompson 2004).

Why does Aribeth hold the attention of the players in this way, rather than them imagining more about their own character? Even as unformed player characters go, the background of your player character in *Neverwinter Nights* is bland. You are an adventurer that Aribeth has asked to come to the academy, and that's it. No hint of a dark secret in your background, or any special abilities developing, like in *Baldur's Gate*, an earlier game by the same company. You do your stuff, get paid like the unremarkable mercenary soul you are, and get on with it. But Aribeth develops. There is time to get to discover her, while you learn the game mechanics. Then it is time to listen to her and relate to her, as she shares her fear. Then you have time to fear her and worry for her, as she sells out Neverwinter. And last, you can kill her or save her, depending on what you did earlier. This is perhaps the only time in the game when your previous actions really matter. Killing Morag is a given, you have to do that for the game to end. And when you kill Morag, the world as you know it is saved, and there's happy ever after. Aribeth's is the one fate that matters that you, the player, can change. Interestingly, the way to change her fate is not through violence, but through peaceful interaction and dialogue.

It is fascinating that the game's most important NPC is a woman, and it is a woman who is described as both good and bad. The helpers do not develop, although you learn their stories. The female helpers are Sherwyn and Linu. Sherwyn stays sassy and seductive, Linu La'Neral is clumsy, a little helpless and nice, and they stay like that. The main adversary is Morag, the snake-type sorceress wannabe mistress of the known world, who stays predictably evil through all of the game. The male characters do not develop much either, except perhaps Lord Nasher, who seems to regret killing Fenthick when he gets to the last chapter. That is as far as he will stretch though, a pretty slim background for convincing Aribeth she should trust him to forgive her – if you manage to talk, and not fight towards the end.

## Creating a player character

In the start of the game you can either chose your player character (PC) among a list of predefined characters, or you can create your own character as you like it, by choosing gender, race, class and a number of combinations of skills, feats, and other specialities (cf. table 1).

Table 1. Creating a character in NWN

Source: NWN Player's Handbook

Each race and class has its own special abilities, some of which will affect how the PC approaches challenges and fights enemies. Alignments decide how your character responses to good, evil, law and chaos, and you need to be true to your alignment in order to achieve certain things. You decide what your initial strengths will be by distributing points to your ability scores, which in turn will change as you gather experience points in the game.

Unlike some other adventure games (Taylor 2003), all races and classes can be combined in *NWN*. Although

Gender	Either male or female.
Race	Either human, dwarf, elf, gnome, half-elf, half-orc or halfling.
Portrait	Choose from a wide variety of images.
Class	Either barbarians, bards, clerics, druid, fighter, monk, paladins, rangers, rogues, sorcerers or wizards.
Alignments	Either lawful good, neutral good, chaotic good, lawful neutral, true neutral, chaotic neutral, lawful evil, neutral evil or chaotic evil.
Ability scores	Choose your initial scores in strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom and charisma.
Packages	Each class has its own package.
Appearance	Choose shape of head and body, tattoo, clothing and voice.

the special strengths of the PC is decided through race, class and alignments and you might achieve certain advantages by playing in accordance with these strengths, you can also chose to play in conflict with them, and you can freely combine race, class and alignments. Thus, the numbers of choices you have in the PC creation process offer a real opportunity to create a highly individualised PC.

The first step in the creation process is to choose gender, whereupon you are told that “[t]he choice of making your character Male or Female is purely an aesthetic one, as both are equally capable. In *Neverwinter Nights*, gender has no bearing on the ways in which skills or abilities are applied” (BioWare 2002). Consequently, the chosen gender will not make the character more or less fit to fight its way through the quests of the game. According to Graner Ray it has been a ‘common practice’ in computer games to offer only a limited number of female PCs together with larger number of male PCs (Graner Ray 2004, pp. 100-101). The statistics on female primary game characters in a study by Downs and Smith (2005) shows that the rate of female to male for primary characters was 12% to 88%, which makes *Neverwinter Nights* a minority game. In *NWN* the freedom to chose and combine abilities is not limited by the choice of gender, and the various abilities are not affected by the choice of gender. It is also interesting that the number of races and classes available in *NWN* gives attention to other characteristics of the individual than gender. Thus, this creates a kind of gender equality as far as what concerns the PC’s playability. This does, however, not mean that gender has no *meaning* for the PC in *NWN*.

Gender is most obviously visible in the PCs *bodily appearance*; portrait, shape of head and body, tattoo, voice and clothing. Once you have chosen gender, the available portraits for the PC will be either male or female. For both genders, you can freely choose between portraits with features calling attention to various races, and between young, old, beautiful, ugly, slick, happy, and angry faces. However, the portrait will only appear on the character sheet, while the actual playing PC that you control in the game will be drawn from a more limited and standardised set of avatars. There is not always a perfect correspondence between the two. Although bodily shapes clearly signal gender, both genders have the choice of a slim or a more stocky body.

Also the voice calls attention to gender. You can choose from a number of voices, mainly differing with respect to sociolect and the timber of the voice. Each voice has a number of default statements useful in battle, to enemies and to friends. Most of the male voices express a ‘manly’ determination and toughness. Exceptions are the ‘high-strung evangelist’ with its preaching, almost singing voice and the ‘manic psychotic’, who mainly growl. Most of the female voices also exhibit firmness and toughness, except the ‘innocent idealist’. While the other voices use confirmative or imperative statements (Fighter: “Attack if you can. I don’t fear you!”), the ‘innocent idealist’ sounds like a wimpy and scared young woman, hesitating and stuttering in some of her statements (Innocent idealist: “You ... you can fight me, right here.”).

It has not been obvious that female PCs have the same choice in clothing as male PCs, and before the release of *NWN*, the producer Trent Oster was interviewed about this at ‘www.womengamers.com’ in 2000: “Is it true that for the *NWN* female models, the full plate mail covers the whole body, rather than being just a metal bikini?” (WomenGamers.Com 2000b) According to Oster,

[f]emale players should have the same variety as male players in terms of models, colors, and clothing types. As for armor, we’ve taken the approach that, in order for armor to actually protect a character, it has to at least cover that character. We are building the females in the same manner as the male armors (ibid.).

And in *NWN*, the clothing vary from the light outfit illustrated above, to a more covering outfit with long legs, sleeves and collar for both genders, and as you go along in the game, you either find or buy new armour, most of which also has special protective abilities. Two differences in armours seem however to call more attention to the female than the male body. First, the armours covering only parts of the body are found in very limited versions for male characters, while they are more numerous for females. Second, while the tiny male armours do not really reveal much of the male body but a narrow section of the stomach and chest, the tiny female armours for women is barely covering the breasts and hips, emphasising a sexualised style which calls attention to female bodily forms, some of which might give stronger associations to an advanced sex toy or an evening gown than to the outfit of a warrior. According to Downs and Smith (2005), 41 % of the female game characters they found were depicted with sexually revealing clothing, while the same was true for 11% of the male characters. This kind of clothing also dominates the illustrations of the game, both offline and in the intermezzos in between scenes in the game.

Also the full-body armour call attention to feminine forms, with 'Madonna-like' metal corsets which accentuate the breasts. It can be claimed that this simply portrays the female body. However, neither does it appear as particularly comfortable (maybe you need to have breasts to see it that way), nor as practical for the purpose of shielding the body from physical attacks (which should be obvious also for the breastless). There is no similar sexualisation of the male body in armour, although if you really are looking for it, the male PCs do appear to have a nice 'package.' Consequently, the main difference is not the available armour, but rather the different look as the character wears them as well as different emphasis on the gendered and sexualised body.

The claim about gender having no significance for the PCs abilities in the game is in accordance with the experiences we have made playing the game. How you choose to play the game makes a more significant difference for the outcome of the game. Thus BioWare is right by claiming that gender means nothing in this context. However, this should not be mistaken for a claim about gender having no meaning. We have illustrated some of the differences in the appearances of male and female PCs, but what exactly do these differences signify? What gender constructions are supported by the PCs in *NWN*? Or seen from the players' angle: does it make any difference if the PC is visually strong and masculine, or tiny and feminine in the world of *NWN*?

The availability of choices in *NWN* means that you can choose to play either with a strong and masculine young male PC, or a young, beautiful and feminine female PC – the most clearly stereotypical versions. However, you might also choose to play an elderly man with beard, or an 'ugly' 'monsterlike' woman, like a half-orc, with a stocky body and harsh voice, neither of whom display stereotypical masculinity or femininity. In other words, *NWN* makes available both male and female PCs which move away from beautified images of gender. However, neither the sexualisation of the female body through armour, nor the stereotyping of the male body as strong and masculine are dramatically altered by choosing non-stereotypical features, as the playing PCs for both gender, as mentioned, is drawn from a limited set of visualisations of the PC. The old man still comes with a strong masculine body, and the ugly woman still comes with a nice appearance.

### **Sexualisation and stereotypes**

The sexualisation of the female body has been discussed in numerous articles about female computer game heroines (Graner Ray 2004, Taylor 2003, Haines 2004, Krotoski 2004), like Lara Croft (Kennedy 2002), and studied at a more general basis (Downs and Smith 2005, Hartmann and Klimmt 2005). As we have seen above, the sexualisation of the female body is also prominent in the representations of gender in *NWN*. Sheri Graner Ray (2004) points to how sexualisation of female PCs is achieved through signals that "are often ridiculously exaggerated" (2004, p. 102), while men are not presented as 'hypersexualized': Male avatars "do not display anything that indicates sexual receptiveness, such as an erection, red lips, or heavily lidded eyes, and their sexual organs are not enlarged to unrealistic proportions" (2004, p. 104). It is true that male PCs in *NWN* are not 'overly exaggerated' or sexualised. However, neither is the trend of 'red lips' or 'heavily lidded eyes' dominating among the female avatars, although some examples can be found. The sexualisation in *NWN* is primarily produced through bodily forms and armour, but also through portraits and voice. Although male PCs are not equally sexualised, they are represented through gendered stereotypes, primarily through signals of a strong and muscular body. However, as T. L. Taylor points to, even though both male and female PCs are represented through gender stereotypes, this can signal power for men, while big breasts "only acts as sexual markers and their meaning remains fairly one dimensional" (Taylor 2003, p. 39).

We can establish that, despite variations, the female body is more sexualised than the male body also in *NWN*, but what does that mean for the player? It is not within the scope of this article to explore what kind of character women prefer to play with. However, there are a number of other researchers who have explored this.

The first interesting question is what PC men and women actually prefer to play. There are however differing views on this question. According to Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen, it is “well known that many men enjoy using a female character”, and also “it is supposedly ...a quite widespread practice among women players to choose characters that are ‘gender neutral’ ...or to pick a male character” (2004, p. 173). Graner Ray (2004, p. 95) however claims that the availability of female avatars is vital to attract female players, and women prefer female PCs because “[p]laying a male character just doesn’t feel right” (Graner Ray 2004, p. 100). Gansmo, Nordli and Sørensen refers to ‘well known practices’, and the empirical foundation for Graner Ray’s claim is very thin. However, Graner Ray’s claim is also supported by Taylor’s study of female players of *EverQuest* (Taylor 2003). Thus, there is not only limited empirical material supporting these claims, they are also disagreeing with respect to what gender women prefer to play. However, even the claim that women prefer female PCs is followed by criticism against the depiction of women. According to Lizzie Haines’ (2004) study from UK, girls “certainly don’t like the hypersexual avatars” (2004, p. 7). There is the quite recent study of female dislikes in games by Hartmann and Klimmt (2005), which shows that women dislike games which give “inappropriate” representations of the female body. And Taylor has observed that female players of *EverQuest* “often struggle with the conflicting meanings around their avatars, feeling they have to ‘bracket’ or ignore how they look” (Taylor 2003, p. 36). Lisbeth Klastrop also illustrates a bodily embarrassment in her exploration of the world of *EverQuest* when she describes her ‘trouser quest’ – an effort to acquire a trouser covering her nearly naked body (Klastrop 2004). Also Taylor’s female informants were uncomfortable with female nakedness, one of them saying “I don’t have a problem with a ‘sexy’ character; I just don’t want to play one where body parts are hanging out to the world...[W]ho would go into battle wearing a chain bikini? Really? OUCH!” (Taylor 2003, p. 36). This is however not the case in *NWN* (not unless you choose to undress your character), where clothing covering the whole body is available from the start of the game, and neither is the female characters ‘ridiculously exaggerated’, apart from the mentioned armours.

As Graner Ray (2004) points out, the player character is important because it is through this the player experience the game (2004, p. 94), and Aleks Krotoski (2004) has found a tendency for women to enjoy a game more if they can identify with the PC (2004, pp. 13-14). This however either means accepting the sexualisation and stereotypification, or, as Taylor points to, ignore certain parts of the PC’s appearance.

The study by Downs and Smith (2005) focuses directly on the factor of exaggerated sexuality, or hypersexuality: “Hypersexuality is defined as excessive concern with, or indulgence in, a sexualized appearance or activity.” (2005, p. 13). In an assessment of constructed game covers, the females disliked the covers that indicated aggression and depictions of women in overly sexualised poses. It is interesting to see how exaggerated sexuality tends showing up as an indicator which will make women avoid a game – although entertainment value may make women ignore the exaggerations: women are willing to compromise for fun, no real surprise there.

It is tempting to ask why men are not being sexualised the same way as female PCs. The obvious answer is that ‘sexual receptive’ is not a vital part of stereotypical masculinity. Others have pointed to the young male designers and their ‘I-methodology’. However, the designer of the sexualised female characters in *EverQuest* was a woman who also claimed to have employed ‘I-methodology’. And she also illustrates another probable cause for the different levels of sexualisation; she expected most of the players to be men between 18 and 30, and thus the sexualised appearance “made sense” (Taylor 2003, p. 37).

One of the few contexts where men freely and openly enjoy other men seems to be on the football arena, however, accompanied by teasing comments about homoerotic situations. Could the lack of sexualisation of male PCs not only be a result of stereotyped masculinity, but also a fear of male homophobia if male players had to play with sexy male PCs? *Neverwinter Nights*, where gender is supposed to have no practical meaning, does still have a strong heteronormative bias. In the two brothels in the game, the PC can get hints from the prostitutes or have some kind of intimate interaction which leaves the PC undressed and flat on the floor – but only with NPCs of the opposite gender. Although the male prostitute in Luskan indicates that the High Captains have both been calling him to them for – something. This is obviously such a despicable act that you must turn to the dark side to do it.



## Playing the game: Putting a (tiny) female player into the battle

Being a war hero is a typical masculine deed. The male character hardly has any features or characteristics 'breaking the rules' for masculinity in this context. However, this is more ambiguous for the female characters. The female characters are built around a socially recognisable femininity, but they also transgress the 'rules' of femininity by being put into this untypical feminine context, physically fighting enemies. Consequently, the female characters are in conflict with the context, challenging the same stereotypical gendered norms that the character construction is based on (Taylor 2003).

An interesting question, though, is which female character that poses the biggest challenge to the gender stereotypes. Is it the 'ultrafeminine' and tiny character with an 'innocent' voice fighting off hordes of enemies, or is it the 'ugly', strong 'monsterlike' female character with a harsh voice growling her orders as she faces the enemies?

Søndergaard claims that the individual may break some, but not too many, gendered rules and still be 'recognised' as either male or female. However, a balance is needed; if you break some rules, you need to 'score' high in the gender correct ways in other aspects (Søndergaard 1996). Thus, the ultrafeminine (high score) fighting (low score) heroine displays this balance. Does however a female figure which does not have any particular feminine features, fulfil such a balance?

Studies of women participating in masculine contexts often points to the cultural clash that occurs, and how women have to 'bridge the gap' between femininity and masculinity (cf. Søndergaard 1996, p. 398). How does this relate to the female player characters? Culturally – for the users (or researchers) – the same clash is present in *NWN*, as argued above. However, the clash does not exist in the game. Quite the opposite; *NWN* creates a 'natural' position for a female warrior and heroine in the masculine context of adventure and fighting. The female player character does not have to convince either her friends or her enemies that she is capable of the deeds she is assigned for.

Helen W. Kennedy has argued that the 'ultrafeminine' PC in a masculine context represents an ambiguity as they, on the one side, challenge familiar gendered patterns and through their '*elaborate artifice* could serve to underline the very constructedness of conventional ideals of femininity" (Kennedy 2002). On the other side they become bodily models, and she points to the "sad irony in the idea that real women are more and more likely to use technology in order to become more like virtual women who fundamentally *are* just technology" (Kennedy 2002). Perhaps we can hope that female PCs also can become role models in other respects, as they certainly do fulfil the 'post-modern' request for women to participate in activities not traditionally regarded feminine. And they certainly do fulfil the requests from Cassell and Jenkins, who warn against games designed specially for girls, because they would only be "teaching girls to act like girls are supposed to act" (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, p. 28).

## Conclusion

'Gender and games' tends to be about girls and women. Why is it that 'women' represent the interesting gender in this discussion? First of all, the male domination in the computer games industry and among gamers makes women 'outsiders'; those who are 'invited in'. Our aim in this article has been to ask *what* women were invited into, which is the second interesting question that brings women into focus. We have illustrated that *NWN* has come a far way to create 'good' gender representations for a 'transgender' game. However, we have also pointed to a number of problems with these representations, problems which concern women more than men. But why is it a 'problem'? Does it really matter that female PCs are more sexualised and objectified than male PCs? In a report from the Game Developers Conference in 2000, WomenGamers.com refers to a comment from a male participant:

It is difficult to understand why female gamers make such a big deal out of how female characters look, when all the male characters are portrayed in an unrealistic, unattainable manner as well-for example, with a very muscular, v-shaped physique. Women expect a different standard to be applied to female characters than to male characters (Wright 2000).

He is right, however missing one important point; they both seem to be treated according to a *male* standard. Or as Sheri Graner Ray (2004) puts it: "Male characters are presented as males would like to be in the game – young, strong, and virile. Likewise, the female characters are presented as male players would like them to be – young, fertile, and always ready for sex" (2004, p. 104). The stereotypification of female PCs has a more demeaning effect than the stereotypification of men; big muscles signify power, big breasts do



not. And these gender constructions do not come from 'nowhere'. They are results of (conscious) choices made by designers.

We will argue that despite the inclusion of 'feminine' characteristics and the rejection of gender as a sign of a significant difference, the construction of gender in *NWN* is built on strongly stereotypical, dualistic and heteronormative understandings of gender, both in the player characters, the story and in the game environments. However, *NWN* does in some ways fulfil its promises to the female audience. Female characters in the game take on prominent positions, they display non-traditional positions confronted with men, and the game environment establish a 'natural' battlefield for women. But *NWN* is trapped in a difficult position between being a classic game, include women, and not reproduce gender as a stereotypical dualism. We find that this exemplifies an important discussion, which needs to be addressed in critical studies of computer games.

The reason why this is important does not lie in the much promoted influence studies, which have been eagerly searching for the cause of youth violence, crime, bigotry or gender stereotypes in computer games. Gender was stereotyped in fiction – and perhaps particularly in the type of slightly underground, trashy fiction as *Neverwinter Nights* relates to – long before the games were first created. But the computer game is a growing, powerful genre for artistic expression, and at the moment the argument for why women have no really attractive options among the games is: Because women don't like games. And so the gamers, the researchers and the industry are going around in circles, the gamers playing the games that work, the researchers looking at what exists, but without no real options for how things could be, and the industry with a keen eye to the baseline, not willing to risk anything in order to gain the other half as players... because women don't like games anyway.

And so it becomes important to point out what the games are really saying to the women playing. The message of *Neverwinter Nights* is that it is OK to be female, females are equal with the males in all aspects, but we do like to look at a good body moving across the screen. To a point this is not such a bad message. It is not victimising females more than males; it has some women in lead roles and a lot more female characters in the different positions and on all sides than the average computer game, and it reacts to the gender of the player character, favouring the females in some ways, the males in others. But at the same time it is perhaps one of the most perfect representations of the modern feminist trap. The female characters in *NWN* do everything the boys do, and they still manage to look feminine while doing it. So rather than being offered freedom from female stereotypes, the game just adds the demands to a male to the demands to a female. It sounds almost social realistic, and who would have thought that about a fantasy role playing game.

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